



Testimony of
Ed Hawthorne, President
Connecticut AFL-CIO

Appropriations Committee
February 15, 2023

***HB 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025,
and Making Appropriations Therefor***

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ed Hawthorne, and I am proud to serve as the President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, a federation of hundreds of local unions representing almost 250,000 active and retired workers in the private sector, public sector, and building trades, including thousands of members who work in our public higher education institutions. Our members live in every city and town in our state and reflect the diversity that makes Connecticut great. It is on their behalf that I submit testimony on the Governor's higher education budget proposals.

Overall, we are disappointed that at a time when budget surpluses and the Rainy Day Fund are historically high, the Lamont administration has proposed what amounts to deep cuts in our public systems of higher education. As recently as last week, the General Assembly and the Governor congratulated themselves for renewing the fiscal "guardrails" that have contributed to the state's improved financial picture. But we ask you all to remember the repeated cycles of austerity and disinvestment before 2017 and since. We should remember that many who shouldered the heaviest burdens during those times were our students. They have been asked to manage soaring tuition rates, declining financial aid, skyrocketing levels of debt and cuts in services and academic programs. Now that our economic situation has improved so dramatically, it's time to reinvest in our future by funding our public colleges and universities. We are disheartened that this budget proposal does not do that.

If enacted, the Governor's proposed budget would leave UConn and UConn Health with significant shortfalls (\$159.6M in FY 2024 and \$197.1M in FY 2025), creating a precarious situation that will have detrimental impacts on UConn and its students, families and employees. During a presentation before this committee on Friday, the OPM Secretary seemed to express a level of hostility towards the university that we found disturbing. There appears to be a difference of opinion about how the university could have or should have used ARPA funds during the once in a century global pandemic and an apparent determination to exert financial consequences for those actions. Under this budget proposal, students will be the ones to suffer the impacts of that disagreement. There is a wide acceptance and understanding that PreK-12 schools, who used ARPA funds in similar ways, need more state support post-pandemic. It's unfathomable to think public colleges and universities are any different.

The Governor's budget makes significant changes to how higher education employees' fringe benefits are paid. While we appreciate the proposal to move legacy costs for all employees to the

Comptroller's budget, the associated reduction in the block grants is concerning. It amounts to taking one step forward and two steps back. We encourage the Committee to replace these dollars in the block grants.

We are also concerned about making college affordable for our next generation of workers. We appreciate the addition of \$4M for the needs-based Roberta Willis Scholarship but fail to understand the wisdom of sweeping \$15M in unallocated dollars in the program. How did \$15M go unallocated in the first place and why sweep it when so many families are struggling to make ends meet? Connecticut students need more financial aid, not less.

We encourage the Committee to take advantage of our state's robust finances and invest in our public colleges and universities so that our students can access affordable, high quality higher education. Thank you.